DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 769 TM 014 966

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TITLE Self-Directed Learning: A Deweyan Reconstruction.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Educational Psychology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Independent Study; Mentors; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Dewey (John)

ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning is reconceptualized in light of John Dewey's work. Although one would think that proponents of self-directed learning would turn to Dewey's philosophy of education to find support for the idea of self-directed learning, such is often not the case. Instead, advocates of self-directed learning frequently look to Carl Rogers and humanistic psychology. It is contended that a Deweyan analysis leads to a richer basis for advocating a form of self-directed learning that enhances learning but does not endorse the naive relativism frequently associated with self-directed learning. Rogers and others argue that learning must be personally appropriated by the learner. Dewey's theories support this contention, but recommend examining more critically the nature of the appropriation. The idea of direction is a key notion in Dewey's work. Genuine education, for Dewey, increases the capacity of the self to provide direction for subsequent education. As Dewey's criticism of the tendencies of progressive education elucidates, the teacher must initiate the process and provide guidance. Subsequently, learning becomes increasingly self-directed. The best way for the teacher to think of the educational process is as a shared experiencing in which the teacher functions as mentor and empowers the learner. Specific ideas applicable to teachers' practice are outlined. (Author/TJH)

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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: A DEWEYAN RECONSTRUCTION

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American Educational Research Association
April 17, 1990

TM014946

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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: A DEWEYAN RECONSTRUCTION

John B. Mason

Summary

Self-directed learning describes teaching and learning practices which, its advocates believe, enhance student learning in school by encouraging students to become engaged in the learning process as active participants. Critics charge that self-directed learning, which often amounts to giving students the freedom to decide what and how to learn, endorses a naive and simplistic relativism that discounts and depreciates teaching and fails to account for realities of the learning process.

Although one would think that proponents of self-directed learning would turn to John Dewey's philosophy of education to find support for the idea of self-directed learning, such is often not the case. Instead, advocates of self-directed learning frequently look to Carl Rogers and humanistic psychology.

This paper reconceptualizes self-directed learning in light of Dewey's work. Such an analysis leads to a richer basis for advocating a form of self-directed learning that enhances learning but does not endorse the naive relativism frequently associated with self-directed learning.

Rogers and others argue that learning must be personally appropriated by the learner. Dewey would agree, but we must examine more critically the nature of the appropriation. The idea of direction is a key notion in Dewey's work. Genuine education, for Dewey, increases the capacity of the self to provide direction for subsequent education. As Dewey's criticism of the tendencies of progressive education makes clear, the teacher must initiate the process and provide guidance. Subsequently, learning becomes increasingly self-directed. The best way for the teacher to think of the educational process is as a shared experiencing in which the teacher functions like a mentor. The purpose of teaching in this framework is empowerment of the learner. This reconstruction of self-directed learning both endorses a more meaningful role in the learning process for the teacher and offers insight into Dewey's understanding of the ideas of direction and guidance in the learning process.

The paper offers specific ideas applicable to teachers' practice.

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A perennial concern of teachers is how to get students involved in the learning process as active participants and not just passive recipients. One contemporary approach that has been advocated is self-directed learning, which in the simplest terms, consists in giving the student freedom to decide what to learn, how to learn, the pace of learning, and the means of evaluating learning.[1] More formally, Bell and Bell define self-directed learning as

> an activity in which the learner takes the initiative and responsibility for the learning process. . . . The learner may have a choice in or control over one or more of the following learning variables: Assessment of learning needs; objectives and learning outcomes; environment; time; pace and sequence; appropriate experiences; human and nonhuman resources; method(s) of evaluation; method(s) of documentation.[2]

Advocates of self-directed learning believe that the student who is encouraged to be an active participant in the learning process will learn more and more deeply, remember more of what is learned, and be able to do more with it. Intrinsic motivation, it is believed, is superior to extrinsic rewards in producing learning and achievement in school. Self-directed learning helps the student develop intrinsic motivation because the student attributes the locus of control over activities and achievement to the self.

Critics, on the other hand, argue that self-directed learning is naive and simplistic. Letting the student decide what and how to learn discounts the role of the teacher and endorses a radical relativism that does not correspond to realities of the learning process.

One would think that proponents of self-directed learning would turn to John Dewey's philosophy of education to find support for the idea. When Dewey describes the essence of education as "vital energy seeking opportunities for effective exercise,"[3] he clearly is referring to the potential energy within the learner and to the expression of it by the learner that is at the heart of the idea of self-directed learning. A belief in self-directed learning is often a characteristic feature of progressive schools. Dewey criticized traditional education for its failure "to see that the initiative in learning and growth is with the individual learner." This produced, Dewey said, a paradigm of schooling that consisted of "imposition from the side of the teacher and reception,

absorption, from the side of the pupil." [4] Rather, for Dewey, the goal of education should be nothing more nor less than more education, and the purpose of schooling should be to initiate and give force to a kind of life-long learning.

> Education should not cease when one leaves school. . . . The purpose of school education is to ensure the continuation of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself . . . is the finest product of schooling.[5]

But advocates of self-directed learning often appeal to humanistic psychology for support rather than turning to Dewey. A major study promoting self-directed learning, for instance, locates it within an existential humanism.

> Self-directed learning . . . is rooted in the basic philosophical position that no one can "know" what is "right" for anyone else. . . . Educational purposes and perceptions of the nature of the world come from within each individual. All people create the world in which they live.[6]

Humanistic psychology is most closely identified with Carl Rogers. Rogers believes that learning occurs best without teaching. In Rogers' view, "Anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential. . . . The outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful."[7] Describing what they call the "therapeutic" conception of teaching, Fenstermacher and Soltis discuss the impact on teaching of Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology.

> "Teaching," claims Rogers, "is a vastly over-rated function." . . . What is important is not what can be taught, but rather what is learned. "The only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning."[8]

It is unfortunate that self-directed learning has often been naively built on a Rogerian basis, for such a simplistic view depreciates teaching. If we look to Dewey, we will find, I believe, another and a much richer basis for advocating a form of self-directed learning that does not naively devalue teaching or imply a radical relativism that ignores realities of the learning process. I would like to explore how Dewey might construct a notion of self-directed learning.

Dewey would undoubtedly agree that learning must be personally appropriated by the learner, he would suggest that we examine more critically the nature and means of the appropriation. It is true that Dewey rejected the traditional view of education as a rigid,

authoritarian imposition of knowledge, with learners as passive recipients, but to let the argument go with this is to miss the point ,since Dewey's critique of traditional education is only half the argument. Self-directed learning is often construed as something in contrast with "other-directed" learning, but Dewey would reject such a distinction as unproductive, just as he rejected all such dualisms, including a distinction between traditional and progressive education in the first place.

The concepts of direction and self figure prominently in Dewey's philosophy, the former explicitly, the latter more implicitly. Dewey describes education as development, and he argues that the impetus must be the interests of the learner. But he does not describe the process as *self-directed.* Instead, Dewey challenges the idea that the learner can be turned loose, left to decide what to learn. He argues that education must start with the interests of the learner, but Dewey has in mind a kind of direction that he often describes as being provided — by the teacher, the environment, the moving force of the educative experience. The nature of this direction is very important.

Dewey says, for instance:

> The question of education is the question of taking hold of [the learner's] activities, of giving them direction. Through direction, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression. . . . We can direct the child's activities, giving them exercise along certain lines, and thus lead up to the goal which logically stands at the end of the paths followed.[9]

And,

> The "new education" is in danger of taking the idea of development in altogether too formal and empty a way. The child is expected to "develop" this or that fact or truth out of his own mind. He is told to think things out for himself, without being supplied any of the environing conditions which are requisite to start and guide thought. Nothing can be developed from nothing. . . . This is surely what happens when we throw the child back upon his *achieved self as a finality.*[10]

For Dewey, the self is never an achieved finality. It is essential to see the self as a developing entity. The direction which Dewey has in mind is the direction of the developing self in and through educative experiences.

> Development does not mean just getting something out of the mind. It is a development of experience and into experience that is really wanted. And this is impossible save as just that educative medium is provided which will enable the powers and interests that have been selected as valuable to function. . . . The problem of direction is thus the

> problem of selecting appropriate stimuli for instincts and impulses which it is desired to employ in the gaining of new experiences. What new experiences are desirable, and thus what stimuli are needed, it is impossible to tell except as there is some comprehension of the development which is aimed at; except, in a word, as the adult knowledge is drawn upon as revealing the possible career open to the child.[11]

Years later, when Dewey refined this view, his critique of the progressive notion of direction could not have been more clear.

> Traditional education tended to ignore the importance of personal impulse and desire as moving springs. But this is no reason why progressive education should identify impulse and desire with purpose and thereby pass lightly over the need for careful observation, for wide range of information, and for judgement. . . . Since freedom resides in the operations of intelligent observation and judgement by which a purpose is developed, guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of pupils' intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it.[12]

Dewey's dialectical style was to pose questions in terms of an either-or issue like "self-directed" or "other-directed." He handles such a dichotomy not by refuting one and accepting the other, but by reframing the issue, redefining terms, and generating a synthesis. In the first place, Dewey means something different from the ordinary meaning of "direction." In the second place, in Dewey's view, learning is *neither* self-directed *nor* other-directed, but something different from both. If learning is in some sense self-directed, the direction must be richer, more complex and subtle than simply letting the learner decide what to learn.

The key to understanding how Dewey might reconceptualize self-directed learning is the idea of direction, and this leads us to Dewey's concept of the educative experience. For Dewey, education is a continuous process of reconstruction of experience which enables the realization of a continuum of growth and development of the person in a social framework. The kind of direction that Dewey has in mind, as suggested above, is something that is provided by — or perhaps identified with — the moving force of the educative experience.[13]

Not all experience is educative. An experience is educative, in Dewey's view, to the extent that it has qualities of reflectiveness, connectedness, and continuity. An experience that can stand alone is not, for Dewey, an experience; it is merely something that *happens*. The educative experience, rather, is possessed of a connectedness that relates it in a continuum to more experience. Education might be construed as the continuous working out of meaning that reveals

itself in the unfolding of experience. In this process, the continuum of experience, a continuous recycling of means and ends which beget new means and so forth, is the notion of direction which Dewey has in mind. An educative experience is so, at least in part, to the extent that it possesses this quality of direction. Dewey writes:

> We thus reach a technical definition of education: It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which *increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience*. (1) The increment of meaning corresponds to the increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities. . . . (2) The other side of an educative experience is an *added power of subsequent direction* or control. . . . A genuinely educative experience, then, is one in which instruction is conveyed and ability increased, is contradistinguished from a routine activity on one hand, and a capricious activity on the other hand.[14]

That is, direction is something that attaches to the experience, that grows as the experience unfolds. Dewey does more than associate the idea of direction with an educative experience. He considers critical the development of the learner's capacity for direction in the sense of being able to direct subsequent experience. The experience is empowering, and the empowerment is of the learner's direction of experience.

The educative experience is also reflective. The student reflects on the experience, and the reflection becomes a part of the experience. Again, without such reflection, the experience is really only something that happens. But reflecting on the experience, for Dewey, generates new experiences, new things to try, which the learner engages in as a kind of testing of consequences hypothesized. The foreseeing of consequences, the reflecting on experience, has to be carried out by the learner. The teacher can (and needs to) initiate the process and provide judgement, information, and guidance,[15] but it has to be the student engaged in reflecting on consequences of the experience. To the extent that the student is the one doing the reflecting, the student is able to to make the connections that define the line, the *direction* of educative experience. To categorize this as self-directed learning is probably to miss the mark, but self-direction is occurring here. We could say that, in this emerging Deweyan perspective, all genuine education is self-directed learning, in the sense that the learner has to engage in, become one with, the direction (the "moving unity") of unfolding experience.

Genuine education thus increases the capacity of the self to provide direction for subsequent education. As Dewey's criticism of the tendencies of progressive education makes clear, the teacher must initiate the process, and the teacher has to provide guidance. But if the learning process does not *become* increasingly self-directed, then it is not genuinely educative.

It is through such a process, in fact, that the self develops. As already noted, Dewey criticized self-directed learning when we view the child as an "achieved self" with any degree of finality. "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action"[16] — i.e., through education, through interaction with educative experience. The self "readjusts and expands its *past* ideas of itself to take in new consequences as they become perceptible."[17]

This analysis helps us to understand better Dewey's criticisms mentioned earlier. Letting the student decide what to learn, how to learn, when to learn, without any control or direction by the teacher, is miseducative because it violates principles of method Dewey considers essential. Dewey says, for instance, that thinking and learning must be flexible and open. The learner cannot focus on a fixed goal or end.[18] Indeed, it is not the goal itself but the setting of goals, not the aim but the aiming, that is important for Dewey.

Experience is, for Dewey, not something that happens to the student but something that the student does. Dewey rejects the idea that the child can enter into the learning process without guidance, but learning subsequently is not so much a matter of having experiences as it is experiencing in an educative way. To the extent that the student engages in this process, reflecting on consequences and gaining in power to control the direction of subsequent experience, the student is personally appropriating the learning and the learning is becoming self-directed.

The analysis thus far is relatively abstract. As Dewey pointed out, ideas have meaning only when they are made concrete. What insights can we gain from this discussion that might be applicable to teachers' practice?

Self-directed learning ought to be regarded as a viable pedagogical idea. But this does not mean that the teacher gives up any role in initiating or guiding the learning process. Rather, the teacher's goal should be to help the student *acquire*, or *develop* self-directed learning skills. This is different from assuming that the student can be self-directed at the outset.

Then, the teacher should support and guide the student in the reflective process of forming conjectures, developing foresight, and testing hypotheses by thinking about the consequences of actions. The methods that Dewey prescribes can be turned inward to a reflection on the student's learning. The teacher can lead the student to think about setting goals and objectives and evaluating process toward these goals and then reformulating them or making new goals. The best way to do this is by neither imposing nor renouncing a role in the planning and selection of learning activities and objectives, but by engaging in a cooperative venture. Dewey says that "guiding" best captures what he means by direction, and by guiding he says he means "assisting with cooperation."[19] The role best capturing the sense and spirit of such a guiding process is that of a *mentor*.

Rogers' argument that knowledge, to be learned, must be personally appropriated by the learner is also a viable idea, but Dewey would advise the teacher would to be sure that the appropriation takes place in a genuinely educative way, that is, by the student's engagement in the reconstruction of experience. The student must enter into the experience, but the experience must be open to advice, counsel, and guidance by the teacher. Judgement and information (of the logical realm of knowledge) by the teacher is necessary in selecting activities, if the student is to first appropriate the experience in terms of his own interests and instincts.

Several of Dewey's ideas can illuminate teaching practices that might foster the approach to self-directed learning developed here. The first is Dewey's distinction between the logical and the psychological conceptions of knowledge. Learning starts with the psychological — knowledge as used and discovered, *experienced*, by the student — and proceeds to the logical — knowledge in organized form.[20] The problem with leaving to the student the choice of what and how to learn is that it assumes the student can jump to the logical on his own. The task of the teacher is to design a framework for the student to begin to experience the psychological, based on the teacher's

knowledge of the logical. On the other hand, the problem of ignoring entirely the idea of self-direction is that it assumes that the processing from psychological to logical — if it occurs — is something done *to* the student. That is, the teaching can promote the development of self-directed learning when teaching and learning activities are selected and planned in such a way as to develop an overall progression from psychological learning to logical learning. It follows that self-directed learning requires an *active, involved* learning by the student; but it the learning activities to be engaged in by the student should be selected both in terms of those activities which stimulate the psychological development — bear in mind Dewey's dictum that learning must commence with the interests, and instincts of the learner — as well as with regard to the psychological-logical connections the teacher wishes to develop. The first step is selection of activities within an experiential context. Then, In Dewey's words,

> the next step is the progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and also more organized form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject matter is presented to the skilled, mature person.[21]

There is probably a tendency to think of the logical and psychological as two distinct entities, but Dewey would encourage the teacher to avoid thinking of knowledge and learning in a dualistic way. The logical and the psychological are really alternate frames of seeing the same reality, just as knowledge is both internal and external. There is no more consistent theme in Dewey's writing than this disapproval of dualisms. Dewey writes, for instance about the nature of knowledge.

> [There are] two senses of the word "learning." On the one hand, learning is the sum total of what is known, as that is handed down by books and learned men. It is something external, an accumulation of cognitions as one might store material commodities in a warehouse. . . . On the other hand, learning means something which the individual *does* when he studies. It is an active, personally conducted affair. The dualism here is between knowledge as something external, or, as it is often called, objective, and knowing as something purely internal, subjective. . . . Socially, the distinction has to do with the part of life which is dependent upon authority and that were individuals are free to advance. . . . Another dualism is that of activity and passivity in knowing.[22]

A second idea of Dewey's which illuminates practice is his emphasis on *purpose*. What are the teacher's purposes? The implication of the foregoing analysis is that the purpose of teaching should be empowerment. Dewey links the development of purpose in schooling with intelligent

activity, and it is just this notion that distinguishes genuine educative self-directed learning from a misguided and simplistic license. Dewey says, for instance,

> A purpose differs from an original impulse and desire through its translation into a plan and method of action. . . . Overemphasis upon activity as an end, instead of upon *intelligent* activity, leads to identification of freedom with immediate execution of impulses and desires.[23]

The essence of self-directed learning is the student *engaging* with the "moving force of experience." The idea of empowerment is fundamental. Dewey writes, "science is experience becoming rational,"[24] which we might take as paradigmatic. Learning is psychological experience becoming logical. Dewey says the effect of science is to alter our idea of the "inherent possibilities of experience."[25] The effect of learning should be to alter the learner's perception of the possibilities inherent in experience. Knowledge is seen as a tool for personal discovery and for the acquisition of more knowledge.

If this process is to be empowering, the role of the teacher should be to help the student develop plan and method, purposiveness. The teacher can point the student in a direction by asking questions: What are the consequences of this action? What does this activity enable you to do? How could you formulate an appropriate next step in this chain of reasoning or experimentation? Where is this headed? Where should it be headed? How can you use this knowledge as a tool?

The spirit and context in which such questions are asked is critical, for the teacher's aim should be for the direction to emerge freshly within each learning experience. This is possible only if the development of goals, means, and plan is undertaken anew with each student rather than presented as a preconceived and final outcome. This spirit must inform the mentoring relationship between teacher and student.

The social character of education is a central tenet of Dewey's ideas.[26] Learning occurs in a group setting, a community environment, and the teacher should be as much a member of the learning community as the student. The key to reconceptualizing self-directed learning is to view

the educational process in a constructivist frame, as a combination of teaching and learning. The best way for the teacher to think of this is as a process of *shared experiencing*.

Self-directed learning can be approached not as a simplistic license allowing the student to decide what or how to learn but as a journey with student and teacher-mentor as fellow travelers, in which the teacher plans and guides the student's engagement with educative experiences and shares with the student the unfolding meaning and connections within developing experiences and experiments. The teacher initiates learning experiences, subsequently working to make the learner's involvement increasingly self-directed. Such a learning process is empowering, for it has the effect of increasing the learner's power to direct subsequent experience. The teacher's purpose is to engage the student in what is described in a Deweyan sense as the moving force of experience. The moving force of experience is that character of educative learning activities which implies that the experience has a purpose, namely the gradual development of greater capacity for self-direction. This process also enhances, rather than limits, the role of the teacher.

Notes

[1] Delmo Della-Doro and Lois Blanchard, eds., *Moving Toward Self-Directed Learning* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1979), 1.

[2] Deanne F. Bell and Durward L. Bell, "Harmonizing Self-Directed and Teacher-Directed Approaches to Learning," *Nurse Educator*, vol. 8, no. 1, (Spring 1983): 24.

[3] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916, 1944; Macmillan Free Press, 1966), 72.

[4] John Dewey, "Need for a Philosophy of Education," in *The New Era in Home and School*, (London 1934); in Reginald D. Archambault, ed., *John Dewey on Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Random House, 1964; Phoenix Edition, 1974), 6.

[5] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 51.

[6] Della-Doro and Blanchard, 7.

[7] Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (Columbus: Merrill, 1969), 152-153.

[8] Gary D. Fenstermacher and Jonas F. Soltis, *Approaches to Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 30, quoting Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* , 103, 153.

[9] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900, 1915, 1943; combined edition with *The Child and the Curriculum*, 1956), 36-37.

[10] John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902; combined edition with *School and Society*, 1956), 18. Italics added.

[11] Ibid., 18-19.

[12] John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938; Collier edition, 1963), 70-71.

[13] Dewey writes of the "moving unity of experience." *Democracy and Education*, 167.

[14] Ibid., 76-77. Italics added.

Notes

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 351.
17 Ibid., 352.
18 Ibid., 175.
19 Ibid., 23.
20 Ibid., 219-222.
21 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 73-74.
22 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*., 334-335.
23 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 69. Italics in original.
24 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 225.
25 Ibid.
26 See *Experience and Education*, 56-60; *Democracy and Education*, 358.